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# What Is Real: The Subjectivity of Reality in E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann"

Danielle Geistfeld

Minnesota State University - Mankato, [digeistfeld@gmail.com](mailto:digeistfeld@gmail.com)

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## **What Is Real: The Subjectivity of Reality in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann***

*All we have to believe with is our senses, the tools we use to perceive the world: our sight, our touch, our memory. If they lie to us, then nothing can be trusted. And even if we do not believe, then still we cannot travel in any other way than the road our senses show us; and we must walk that road to the end.*

- Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*

What is real? What is fantasy? How can one be certain of one's reality? Of all the writers of the German Romantic literary movement (1795-1848), E.T.A. Hoffmann proved to be especially skilled at confusing reality and fantasy. Weaving together the fantastic and the realistic, Hoffmann was adept at keeping his protagonists, and his readers, on their toes. This paper examines one of Hoffmann's most widely known novellas, *Der Sandmann*, in which the author successfully blends reality and fantasy in the life of his protagonist, Nathaniel. By doing so, Hoffmann, a Romantic writer through and through, criticizes the values of the Enlightenment and addresses the subjectivity of reality. Of central importance is the fear of losing one's eyes, which, within the framework of German Romanticism, represents the fear of losing the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is not. Also of central importance is the idea of outside forces effectively controlling what one sees and, therefore, controlling one's reality. *Der Sandmann* contains several scenes, which illustrate just how easily one's reality can be altered simply by modifying what that person sees. These scenes, as well as several individual characters, function as a criticism of the emphasis the Enlightenment placed on science and scientific advancement. However, Hoffmann also cautions the reader of going to the other extreme by placing too much emphasis on emotion and feeling to the total exclusion of reason. He does this through characters who provide a voice of reason to both the protagonist, Nathaniel, and the reader. These voices of reason bring into question everything Nathaniel has claimed to

have happened in his life, while simultaneously demonstrating how reason and logic can be positive, even for the Romantic. Many modern authors, writers, directors and even musicians have found inspiration in *Der Sandmann*.<sup>1</sup> This paper further attempts to discern why, after nearly two hundred years, this story continues to serve as inspiration for various media in modern pop culture.

Between the years 1795-1848, German Romanticism arose as a response to the Enlightenment of the late seventeenth and early- to mid-eighteenth centuries. The Enlightenment espoused the virtues of rational thought, intellect, scientific inquiry and advancement, order and reason. The Enlightenment was also synonymous with classicism, namely the promotion of reason and formal rules, as well as realism, which promoted fact and the actual (Holman and Harmon). In Enlightened thinking there was no use for imagination, no place for feelings or the expression of feelings, no reason to entertain ideas that had no practical application in society. Flights of fancy, things which could not be explained through scientific means and other such potentially irrational ideas and concepts were frowned upon and deemed useless to the advancement of society and culture. Romanticism strove to restore the validity of emotion in society and culture. Romantic artists, authors, and poets wanted to show that there was a place for, and value in, one's emotions. There did not have to be a logical, rational explanation for everything. Proponents of Romanticism not only looked favorably upon, but also actively

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<sup>1</sup> A wide variety of artists have claimed inspiration from Hoffmann in general and *Der Sandmann* in particular. Edgar Allan Poe and Fyodor Dostoevsky have named Hoffmann as an influence. (newworldencyclopedia.org) More recently, concepts presented in *Der Sandmann* have appeared in works by Phillip K. Dick (Roberts 150) and served as inspiration for several musical works, including "Mein Herz brennt" by the industrial metal band Rammstein (mhb.rammsteinworld.com).

encouraged the use of one's imagination, no matter the outcome. (Jewell) Into this resurgence of the imagination came Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann.

Born in Königsberg on 24 January 1776 and the product of a broken home, E.T.A. Hoffmann had always exhibited a proclivity for the strange, unsettling and bizarre. A lawyer by trade, Hoffmann dabbled in the musical and visual arts as a young man, eventually completing a handful of operas, a symphony, and designing and redecorating rooms at the Mniszeksche Palace in Warsaw, by the time he was 30. (Hollingdale 9) During this time, Hoffmann wrote a small number of stories and musical critiques, but it was only after several failed attempts at a successful musical career that he began to focus more exclusively on his writing. Throughout his life, Hoffmann displayed characteristics of what Hollingdale refers to as a "two-sided, schizophrenic kind of man." (7) Generally able to control himself in public, Hoffmann was prone to random acts of mischief, such as when he drew unflattering caricatures of the leaders of Posen, a town in which he was stationed as a member of the Prussian government. (Hollingdale 8) These caricatures, including one of the commandant of the military garrison stationed there, were made public and eventually led to him being demoted and transferred to the tiny village of Plozk. (Hollingdale 9) Hoffmann had several similar incidences, including one in which he inserted into one of his novels a satire of the proceedings of the government-instituted Commission for the Investigation of Treasonable Organizations and Other Activities, a commission on which Hoffmann, himself, served. Criticizing established institutions and schools of thought through his characters was something Hoffmann did often, and well. However, this time he made the mistake of pointedly telling some friends about it. Word eventually reached the president of the Ministry of Police who recognized himself in one of Hoffmann's characters. This particular incident was seen by the government as an attempt to

undermine the Commission by making it appear ridiculous. (Hollingdale 11, 12) E.T.A.

Hoffmann died, awaiting prosecution for his satirization of the Commission, on 25 June 1822, at the age of 46, of a motor function disease. (Hollingdale 12).

One of E.T.A. Hoffmann's most well-known works, published in 1816, is *Der Sandmann*, a tale of the unfortunate life of Nathaniel. The story begins with a series of letters between Nathaniel and Klara, his good friend and future fiancée. In these letters, Nathaniel, a university student, tells his friend of a recent, troubling incident in which he nearly threw Coppola, a traveling barometer salesman, down the stairs of his apartment because he so closely resembled Coppelius, an associate of his father, who terrified him as a child and of whom Nathaniel still had great fear. He then proceeds to recount in detail events from his childhood that instilled in him a fear of the mythical Sandman. He describes Coppelius as the personification of the Sandman from the folk tale told to him by his mother as a child. In this folk tale, the Sandman would visit children when it was time for bed. He would sprinkle sand in the children's eyes to put them to sleep and bring them pleasant dreams.

After this exchange of letters, the story is taken over by an unnamed narrator and recounts Nathaniel's days at university after his initial encounter with Coppola during his childhood. It is during this time that he meets Spalazani, his science professor, and the traveling salesman Coppola returns. He also meets Spalazani's "daughter", Olympia, who is actually an automaton designed to act and move like a real human being. Nathaniel falls madly in love with her only to lose her during a violent altercation between Spalazani and Coppola in which Olympia is completely dismembered and taken away by Coppola, just as Nathaniel is about to propose to her. The story concludes when Nathaniel, back with and engaged to Klara, commits suicide after a troubling look through a pocket telescope he bought from Coppola.

Throughout this story, Nathaniel struggles with an inability to distinguish between reality and fantasy. The things he sees and hears do not coincide with the explanations he receives regarding his experiences. This struggle begins during Nathaniel's childhood, when he often heard announcements from his mother regarding the imminent arrival of the Sandman. These announcements were always accompanied by the sound of footsteps on the stairs that were proceeding to his father's study. When Nathaniel asks his mother who the Sandman is, she tries to console him by telling him the Sandman is not real, but merely a figure of speech she uses to indicate it is time for the children to go to sleep. (Hoffmann 4) Unsatisfied with this explanation, Nathaniel turns to the old nanny who takes care of his sister. Her version of the Sandman is vastly different than his mother's:

Ei, Thanelchen, weißt du das noch nicht? Das ist ein böser Mann, der kommt zu den Kindern, wenn sie nicht zu Bett gehen wollen, und wirft ihnen Hände voll Sand in die Augen, daß sie blutig vom Kopf herausspringen, die wirft er dann in den Sack und trägt in den Halbmond zur Atzung für seine Kinderchen; die sitzen dort im Nest und haben krumme Schnäbel, wie die Eulen, damit picken sie der unartigen Menschenkindlein Augen auf. (Hoffmann 4)

This version of the Sandman is notably more violent. The sand is not gently sprinkled into the child's eyes, as in Nathaniel's mother's version. The Sandman throws ("er wirft") the sand in the child's eyes and then he throws the eyes in his sack. His motivation for throwing sand in the child's eyes is not to help the child sleep, but to cause the eyes to jump out of the child's head ("daß sie blutig vom Kopf herausspringen"). The eyes are bloody and this process would cause the child extreme pain and terror. The eyes are taken back as feed ("zur Atzung") for the Sandman's children, who have curved beaks and live in a nest, like owls. The offspring and, by extension, the Sandman, himself, are likened to birds of prey who hunt in the night. In this instance, the eyes of naughty children are the prey. In this version, the Sandman exists purely as

a form of punishment for those children who do not listen to their parents. As with most punishments, the child loses something they value. However, in this case, the child permanently loses his or her sight, an entire sense and an important factor in how he or she understands the world. The consequences of disobedience to one's parents are dire and permanent.

Upon hearing this version of the Sandman, Nathaniel completely rejects his mother's explanation that the Sandman is not real. He chooses, instead, to believe the nanny's version of the tale because it is the version that fits with the evidence he has already gathered: Nathaniel has heard the presence of someone on the stairs with each announcement of the Sandman. He has noticed his parents become much more somber and melancholy whenever the Sandman's arrival is announced. Nathaniel's father, normally willing to regale his children with wonderful stories, sits quietly in his chair, smoking and drinking a beer. Nathaniel's mother is noticeably woeful and sad. (Hoffmann 4). If the Sandman is a nice, friendly man who just wants to help children sleep, as Nathaniel's mother claimed, why is there such a noticeable pall over his parents whenever the Sandman was coming? It does not make sense to Nathaniel. However, if the Sandman is an evil, violent man, it makes much more sense to Nathaniel that his parents would be noticeably more melancholy whenever his arrival is imminent.

With this in mind, and fearful for his father, Nathaniel decides to find out for himself who the Sandman is. Late one night, after the Sandman's arrival has been announced, Nathaniel hides in his father's study. In walks a man whom Nathaniel recognizes as his father's associate, Advokat Coppelius. Coppelius had always struck an imposing and frightening figure in his appearance and behavior; from his unnaturally thick head to his bushy, grey eyebrows to his cat-like green eyes to the way he treated Nathaniel and his siblings with utter disdain. (Hoffmann 6)



Piecing all of this information together, Nathaniel draws the conclusion that Advokat Coppelius is, in fact, the Sandman.

Als ich nun diesen Coppelius sah, ging es grausig und entsetzlich in meiner Seele auf, daß ja niemand anders als er der Sandmann sein könne, aber der Sandmann war mir nicht mehr jener Popanz aus dem Ammenmärchen, der dem Eulennest im Halbmonde Kinderaugen zur Atzung holt. (Hoffmann 7)

This is the moment, for Nathaniel, at which the Sandman transforms from merely a scary character, a bogeyman ("Popanz") of a folk tale into a real, living, breathing horror. He knows it deep within his soul ("ging es grausig und entsetzlich in meiner Seele auf"). All of Nathaniel's emotions and gut instincts convince him that this terrifying, horrible man is, in fact, the Sandman. In fact, according to Nathaniel, the Sandman could be no other person ("Als ich nun diesen Coppelius, ging...auf, daß ja niemand anders als er der Sandmann sein könne"). Even though he has evidence on which his belief that Coppelius is the Sandman, by using the special subjunctive case in his letter to Klara, Nathaniel is subconsciously admitting that this belief is merely his personal opinion.

Nathaniel manages to keep his composure and remain hidden. He continues to spy on his father and Coppelius, the Sandman, as they begin a series of experiments. A fire, surrounded by strange instruments, burns on a hearth in a recessed alcove that Nathaniel had always thought was merely a wall closet (Hoffmann 7). Coppelius begins to extract bright flashing unidentifiable items ("hellblinkende Massen") from the fire's smoke and hammer away at them (Hoffmann 8). He cannot quite see what is going on, but it appears to Nathaniel that there are human-like faces surrounding the hearth, all of them missing eyes ("Mir war es, als würden Menschengesichter ringsumher sichtbar, aber ohne Augen – scheußliche, tiefe schwarze Höhlen statt ihrer").

(Hoffmann 8) When Nathaniel is inevitably discovered, Coppelius grabs Nathaniel and throws him on the hearth next to the fire saying, “Nun haben wir Augen – Augen – ein schön Paar Kinderaugen.” (Hoffman 8) This interaction only serves to cement Nathaniel’s belief that Coppelius is the Sandman. Not only is Coppelius violent, like the Sandman, but he also wants Nathaniel’s eyes. Nathaniel’s father manages to convince Coppelius to spare his son his eyes, but Coppelius then decides to conduct observations of the mechanics of Nathaniel’s hands and feet. According to Nathaniel, Coppelius unscrews his limbs, conducts an examination of them and screws them back onto Nathaniel’s body. Nathaniel passes out for an indeterminate amount of time. Upon awakening, he asks his mother if the Sandman is still there. She assures Nathaniel the Sandman is gone and will not harm him anymore. (Hoffmann 8) Her reassurance to Nathaniel that the Sandman is gone indicates that she understands that her son believes the Sandman is real, despite her efforts to convince him otherwise. She acknowledges that, even though she knows the Sandman is merely a folk tale, the reality for her son is quite different. She accepts this and tries to comfort Nathaniel as best she can.

Even though Nathaniel has rejected his mother’s version of the Sandman, he still turns to his mother for comfort in his time of distress. Even though he does not believe her about who the Sandman is, he is ready to accept her assertion that the Sandman has gone and he will not bother Nathaniel anymore. She is, after all, his mother, who loves him and has never treated him poorly. If Advokat Coppelius is the Sandman, as Nathaniel believes, it is not surprising his mother would try to convince him that the Sandman does not exist, especially after everything Nathaniel experienced in his father’s study.

But what happened in Nathaniel’s father’s study? Did the events actually occur as described by Nathaniel? Hoffmann does not say. Rather, he leaves the reader to decide what

exactly happened, whether Nathaniel's limbs were actually removed and screwed back on or if it was just a dream or an overactive imagination. Nathaniel's graphic description of his dismemberment and reassembly (Hoffmann 8) coupled with his firm belief that Coppelius was the Sandman, could have caused him to create and see fantastic images and scenarios in his mind. There are no marks on his arms and legs, no physical indication that any of his appendages were removed and reattached. No mention of any scars or side effects related to this supposed dismemberment is ever made after the retelling of the incident. Thus, doubt as to the reliability of Nathaniel's recollection is established. While he certainly believes that what he says happened actually did happen, with no other corroborating evidence or testimony, the reader is left wondering at the accuracy of Nathaniel's version of events. The questionable nature of Nathaniel's version of these events sets a precedent that will follow him the rest of his life. Throughout the rest of the story, both the reader and the other characters within Nathaniel's world cannot help but question if what Nathaniel says is true.

Nathaniel's fears of the Sandman returning are justified when, a year later, Coppelius returns to the city. At that time, Coppelius and Nathaniel's father commence their experiments but a loud explosion rocks the house and Nathaniel's father is killed. His father's death whilst working with Coppelius is the final straw for Nathaniel. If there is any lingering doubt in his mind about what he saw, heard and deduced that night one year prior about Coppelius being the Sandman, all uncertainty ceases when his father is killed. Coppelius had always terrified Nathaniel and his siblings. He was unfailingly present whenever Nathaniel's mother said the Sandman was coming and he had threatened to steal Nathaniel's eyes, just as the Sandman did in the tale told by the old nanny. Not only has he met all Nathaniel's criteria for being the Sandman,

Coppelius has been present at the death of his father. Coppelius and the Sandman are irrevocably connected for Nathaniel, a connection he will carry with him for the rest of his life.

Nathaniel's inability to trust his sense of sight to determine what is real continues to plague him as an adult, in his interactions with Professor Spalazani, Spalazani's automaton, Olympia, and the traveling salesman, Coppola. Frequently, what Nathaniel sees and is not what the rest of the public sees. His reality is vastly different than everyone else's because he does not see the same things everyone else does. Why is the inability to trust one's sense of sight so frightening?<sup>2</sup> Sight is an important contributing factor in helping one determine reality. Seeing is believing and believing is seeing (Myers 228) Most people require empirical evidence, often visual, of something before they will believe it actually exists. If one can see something for themselves, one is much more likely to believe its existence. Even if something is so far-fetched as to seem impossible and beyond belief, if visual evidence is available, especially first-hand visual evidence, it is more likely to become a reality for those who witnessed it. Sight is one of mankind's most trusted means of verifying reality. Tampering with this sense inherently tampers

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<sup>2</sup> The founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud interprets Nathaniel's fear of losing his eyes as symbolic of the fear of castration (Freud 424) because he believed that sex and sexual impulses are the driving motivational force behind one's actions. (Schultz and Schultz 50).

In *The Uncanny*, Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation of *Der Sandmann*, he refers to the study of dreams, phantasies, myths and legends that result in a clear connection between the fear of losing one's eyes and the fear of castration, specifically the removal of the male sexual organ. (Freud 424) By removing the eyes of disobedient children, Freud suggests that, by extension, the Sandman is removing the ability of his victims to form any lasting relationships. (Freud 425) In *Der Sandmann*, the Sandman/Coppelius always manages to insert himself into Nathaniel's relationships and completely destroy them, first with Nathaniel's father, then with Olympia and finally with Klara.

However, in his analysis of Hoffmann's tale, Freud limits himself to only the first half of the text, which primarily focus on Nathaniel's childhood. Very little is made of the events of Nathaniel's time at university, except in passing. I believe that the events of Nathaniel's adulthood, as well as the events of his childhood, are equally important in deciphering the fear of losing one's eyes.

with one's ability to identify what is real and what is not. Once one forms an incorrect concept of reality based on visual evidence, it is very difficult to accept the truth. (Myers 228)

One way in which one is able to see things, to verify reality, is through various instruments. From spectacles, which exist to make blurry things clear, to telescopes, which exist to make things far away appear closer, several instruments exist throughout the text, which enable one to see things more clearly. As a university student, Nathaniel is visited by Coppola, who is selling barometers. Nathaniel takes one look at Coppola, immediately sees Coppelius, the Sandman personified, instead, and he throws the salesman out of his house. (Hoffmann 3) This is the incident that causes Nathaniel to write to Klara, who, throughout the story, provides a voice of reason for Nathaniel. She does so in her response to Nathaniel in which she puts forth sound, logical evidence as to why the events of Nathaniel's childhood are not the result of the Sandman. She cites an interview she conducted with a local chemist as to the possible explanations for the explosion that killed Nathaniel's father. (Hoffmann 11) She also offers logical reasons why Nathaniel thinks Coppelius and Coppola are the same person, but firmly asserts that Coppelius and Coppola are two distinct, separate people. (Hoffmann 12) Once again comforted by Klara's insight, Nathaniel accepts her reasoning and puts Coppola out of his mind.

Some time later, after Nathaniel has relocated to a new apartment, Coppola, appears again. Recalling Klara's conviction regarding Coppelius and Coppola, Nathaniel politely declines before Coppola is even able to begin his sales pitch. (Hoffmann 21) Coppola replies, "Ei, nix Wetterglas, nix Wetterglas – hab auch schöne Oke – schöne Oke!" Nathaniel, horrified that Coppola claims to be selling eyes, cries, "Toller Mensch, wie kannst du Augen haben? Augen? Augen?" (Hoffmann 22) Trying to reassure Nathaniel that he is only selling spectacles, Coppola produces a seemingly infinite number of spectacles from inside his coat. He places them

on the table and they appear as eyes to Nathaniel, blinking and staring up at him. The more pairs of spectacles Coppola places on the table, blinking, shimmering and staring up at Nathaniel, the more terrified Nathaniel becomes until he cries for the glasses to be taken away. Coppola removes the spectacles from the table and offers pocket telescopes instead. The pocket telescopes, unlike the spectacles, sit benignly on the table. They do not blink and shimmer and stare up at Nathaniel. Realizing this, the fear passes from Nathaniel. He recovers himself and agrees to buy something from Coppola. (Hoffman 22).

Nathaniel's interactions with Olimpia also show his inability to trust his sense of sight to determine reality. While visiting Professor Spalazani's house one day, Nathaniel notices his daughter, Olimpia, sitting alone and very still at a table. He notes that her eyes appear vacant, almost sightless, "als schliefe sie mit offenen Augen". (Hoffmann 14) Nathaniel determines her to be very beautiful and is intrigued by her, but puts her out of his mind. Time passes and while Nathaniel is home from school on break, his apartment building burns down. Fortunately, his friends were able to find him another room while he was away. Nathaniel realizes he now lives across from Professor Spalazani and Olimpia. In fact, through his window, Nathaniel can look directly into Olimpia's room and he often finds himself gazing at Olimpia. While he was merely intrigued by Olimpia after he first met her, Nathaniel becomes infatuated with Olimpia. (Hoffmann 21) But, in his heart, he still loves Klara and does his best to put Olimpia out of his mind, even though he often finds himself gazing at her through their windows. (Hoffmann 21) Eventually the emotional connection he feels with Klara loses out to the constant visual presence of Olimpia. What he sees in Olimpia wins out over what he feels for Klara.

When Coppola appears the second time, Nathaniel eventually decides to purchase a pocket telescope. He finds himself looking through his window into Olimpia's room. Through

the telescope, he is able to see Olimpia more clearly. While her eyes initially appear dull and dead, the more he looks at her through the telescope, the more vibrant and lively her eyes and face become:

Doch wie immer schärfer und schärfer durch das Glas hinschaute, war es, als gingen in Olimpias Augen feuchte Mondesstrahlen auf. Es schien, als wenn nun erst die Sehkraft entzündet würde; immer lebendiger und lebendiger flammten die Blicke. (Hoffmann 23)

Here we have Nathaniel looking at Olimpia through an instrument, a pocket telescope. The effect here is extremely powerful, as Olimpia appears to actually gain life the more Nathaniel uses the spyglass. It is as if the spyglass from Coppola creates life in the formerly lifeless. Once he sees this, Nathaniel's previous thoughts regarding her curious expression and vacant stare are gone. He becomes enamored of Olimpia, and regularly utilizes the telescope to gaze at her through their windows in the days that follow. He becomes so smitten with Olimpia that when her window drapes are closed for a prolonged period of time he is wracked with despair and longing ("ganz verzweifelt und getrieben von Sehnsucht und glühendem Verlangen"). (Hoffmann 23)

Nathaniel's choice of purchase from Coppola is interesting. He chooses to purchase not spectacles, which exist to correct vision, and give a clearer view of reality. Though spectacles inherently modify what one sees, the intended effect is to sharpen one's vision so as to enable one to see more clearly, without distortion or misrepresentation. Instead, he purchases a telescope, which, by its very design, distorts reality by enlarging objects and making them appear closer than they actually are. (Röder 68)

These scenes function as a criticism of the Enlightenment, a purpose that becomes clearer when one takes into consideration the literary period in which the work was written. Sight, visual observation, is a key part of the scientific process. If one's theory can be repeatedly proved with visual evidence, the theory gains more scientific credence. By taking away the power of sight,

either by removing the eyes or by modifying what one sees through various means, one is robbed of the ability to trust that scientific concepts are correct and true. Because sight can be so easily modified through any number of different means, such as spectacles, telescopes, microscopes and magnifying glasses, one can never truly be certain of anything science deems to be fact. It is true that devices such as telescopes and microscopes exist to make things easier to observe. However, these items were created through experimentation and scientific advancement, the very processes for which they exist to provide support. These devices are also generally made by someone other than the user. The user needs to trust that the designer and manufacturer of the device made no errors anywhere in the device's production. Any error, no matter how small, could drastically change what is seen through the device. The user is at the mercy of the mechanics involved. If one uses a faulty device, there is a good chance he or she will not know it and will accept whatever is seen through it as reality. If one cannot fully trust the products of scientific advancement, one should not place too much emphasis what those products produce.

Hoffmann also criticizes the Enlightenment by means of several of his characters. It is no coincidence that the antagonists of the story, Spalazani and Coppelius/Coppola are scientists. Spalazani makes his living as a professor of physics at the university Nathaniel attends (Hoffmann 13). Coppelius is an innovator and inventor, as evidenced by his work with Nathaniel's father, and, later posing as Coppola, a designer of advanced robotics with Spalazani. (Hoffmann 29, 30) Olimpia, the product of scientific experimentation and advancement, can be seen as representing the classical virtues of the Enlightenment. Her very name, Olimpia, brings to mind the Olympic games and Olympic athletes, themselves paragons of the classical ideals regarding physical prowess espoused by the ancient Greeks. In *Der Sandmann*, Olimpia is the epitome of scientific advancement of the day. She is a robot that is extremely life-like. In fact,



many in the public find her unnerving (unheimlich) because at first glance, she could pass for human. (Hoffmann 27) Even though the public knows she is a robot, her appearance and mannerisms are so human-like that it is easy to forget that she is not actually human. With Olimpia's ultimate, literal destruction at the end of the story, Hoffmann shows the classical ideals of the Enlightenment are easily torn apart. *Der Sandmann* suggests that placing one's trust in these ideals will ultimately lead to disappointment and despair.

Hoffmann's criticism of the Enlightenment is extended to Nathaniel's unreliability as a narrator. This unreliability creates the same ambiguity between the reality of the text and the imagination of its protagonist. Nathaniel's unreliability is first hinted at when he recounts his childhood encounter with Coppélius, which causes him to black out for an indeterminate amount of time. When Nathaniel awakens, there is no evidence that his limbs have been removed and reattached, nothing other than the memory of the incident in his mind.

The unreliability of Nathaniel's narration becomes more concrete during Nathaniel's courtship of Olimpia. Nathaniel's first interaction with Olimpia is at a concert, really a public demonstration of her abilities, in which she plays the piano and sings. To most of the concert-goers, her appearance is unnaturally thin, with an odd bowing shape to her back and her movements are stiff and deliberate. But her piano playing is excellent and her singing voice is bright and clear as a bell. (Hoffmann 24) Here, Hoffmann shows that to most of the public, Olimpia is quite obviously not human. While she appears human-like and exhibits abilities of a human, such as movement and singing, Spalazani has not yet been able to produce an automaton that could entirely pass for a human being. The guests are at the concert to see Spalazani's creation, to marvel at the advancements in technology that make such an automaton possible, but they are fully aware that Olimpia is a robot and not a person. However, Nathaniel, standing at the

back of the hall, is unable to see Olimpia very well so he utilizes the telescope from Coppola. Through the glass, he sees her gazing back at him and it seems to him as if the music she plays is meant only for him. No one else sees this or even contemplates this possibility, but no one else has Nathaniel's pocket telescope, which was able to create life in the previously lifeless Olimpia. The telescope imbues qualities on Olimpia that are not otherwise observable. The other guests are unable to see what he sees. From this point on, he is lost, completely and utterly in love with Olimpia. He asks her to dance, an exercise that finds Nathaniel constantly thrown out of his stride because of the rhythm of Olimpia's movement. To the rest of the public in attendance, this further proves that Olimpia is not real. However, Nathaniel simply decides he is not as good of a dancer as he always thought he was. Olimpia's near-life-like qualities, coupled with the effects of the telescope, create doubt in Nathaniel's mind about something he had previously thought he excelled at. He second-guesses himself and decides that he must have been wrong the whole time regarding his dancing abilities. What he is seeing and experiencing now is the truth, as opposed to what he had thought for the majority of his life before this moment.

After dancing, Nathaniel attempts conversation with Olimpia, though Olimpia only responds with "Ah, ah", regardless of the question Nathaniel asks. (Hoffmann 26) However, her odd posture, stiff and deliberate movements, piercing singing voice and apparent inability to actively participate in a conversation do not register with Nathaniel. He writes these things off as evidence of his own shortcomings, holding Olimpia up as a paragon of social grace, unjustly ignored by the rest of society. His friend, Siegmund, provides an alternate perspective.

Shortly after Nathaniel begins his courtship of Olimpia, his friend Siegmund asks Nathaniel, "Tu mir den Gefallen und sage, wie es dir gescheiten Kerl möglich war, dich in das Wachsgesicht, in die Holzpuppe da drüben zu vergaffen?" (Hoffmann 27) Angered at the

comparison of his beloved Olympia to a wooden doll with a wax face, Nathaniel replies that he is equally confused that no one else recognizes Olympia's beauty. To this, Siegmund responds:

Wunderlich ist es doch, daß viele von uns über Olympia ziemlich gleich urteilen. Sie ist uns – nimm es nicht übel, Bruder! – auf seltsame Weise starr und seelenlos erschienen. Ihr Wuchs ist regelmäßig sowie ihr Gesicht, das ist wahr! – Sie könnte für schön gelten, wenn ihr Blick nicht so ganz ohne Lebensstrahl, ich möchte sagen, ohne Sehkraft wäre. Ihr Schritt ist sonderbar abgemessen, jede Bewegung scheint durch den Gang eines aufgezogenen Räderwerks bedingt. Ihr Spiel, ihr Singen hat den unangenehm richtigen geistlosen Takt der singenden Maschine, und ebenso ist ihr Tanz. Uns ist diese Olympia ganz unheimlich geworden, wir mochten nichts mit ihr zu schaffen haben, es war uns, als tue sie nur so wie ein lebendiges Wesen und doch habe es mit ihr eine eigne Bewandnis. (Hoffmann 27)

Here Siegmund provides the strongest argument, both for Nathaniel and the reader, as to Olympia's true nature. By addressing Nathaniel as his brother ("Bruder"), Siegmund attempts to connect with Nathaniel on an emotional level before appealing to him on an intellectual level. He tries to temper his words by telling Nathaniel he does not mean them as an insult, but merely as an explanation as to what everyone else around Nathaniel notices about Olympia. To everyone else, Olympia appears stiff and soulless ("starr und seelenlos"). She does not appear lifeless, as that aspect of Spalazani's and Coppola's creation was successful. She was designed to look and act like a human and, by all accounts, this goal has been achieved. However, since she is not human, she will never possess a soul, an attribute Siegmund and the rest of the general public realize, but one that Nathaniel does not notice because of the effects of Coppola's telescope. Siegmund tells Nathaniel that all of these observations, from the wax face and wooden puppet appearance to the stiffness and mechanical nature of Olympia's movements ("jede Bewegung scheint durch den Gang eines aufgezogenen Räderwerks bedingt") to her soullessness, are all things one can clearly see through the power of one's own sight. One can look directly at Olympia, without the mediating use of a telescope, and see her for what she is: a robot. Olympia's true nature is apparent to the rest of the public just by looking at her directly, without the use of a

telescope or other means of visual modification. This is where Siegmund's argument falls short of convincing Nathaniel, for Nathaniel has transposed onto Olimpia the qualities imbued by the telescope. He has looked upon Olimpia without the use of the telescope and seen her eyes, full of life. He has seen her movements and, while admittedly odd, he reasons that she just moves differently than everyone else. He dismisses her stiffness while dancing and her near muteness in conversation as qualities of a human superior to himself.

At Siegmund's words, Nathaniel is further incensed and defends his love for Olimpia, dismissing his friend's misgivings as the result of Siegmund's ignorance. Nathaniel claims that only through Olimpia's love and sense and thoughts does he find himself again ("Nur mir ging ihr Liebesblick auf und durchstrahlte Sinn und Gedanken, nur in Olimpias Liebe finde ich mein Selbst wieder.") (Hoffmann 27) As Röder notes, "Love may render the lover blind but it also opens up to him perspectives on the world denied to others." (60) Because he is so in love with Olimpia, Nathaniel sees qualities in her that no one else can see. Eventually, Siegmund comes to recognize that nothing he says will ever change Nathaniel's mind and he gives up his argument.

This is the point in *Der Sandmann* that Hoffmann drives home the ambiguity of reality. For Nathaniel, Olimpia is a living, breathing, perfect specimen of a human woman. He has seen it with his own eyes; therefore, that is reality. With Siegmund's simple inquiry as to how Nathaniel can be so infatuated with Olimpia, the reader is presented with a different view of reality. To Siegmund and everyone else, Olimpia is disturbing. She is so unsettling because even though she is a robot, she looks and acts almost entirely human. All the oddities Nathaniel attributes to deficiencies on his part are seen as evidence by everyone else that Olimpia is, in fact, not human. Siegmund's description of Olimpia as a wooden doll with a wax face infuriates Nathaniel but suggests to the reader that Olimpia is not what Nathaniel purports her to be. For

Siegmund is correct. Olympia is, in fact, an automaton created by Professor Spalazani and programmed to sing, dance and otherwise imitate normal human behavior. Siegmund does not realize that Nathaniel's feelings for Olympia are real. When he asks how a clever man like Nathaniel can become so infatuated with a wooden doll, he is not being rude or slighting Olympia. He genuinely believes Nathaniel knows what Olympia is. It is clear, however, that Nathaniel not only thinks Olympia is a human but he refuses to examine the evidence that she is not. He already has come to the conclusion that she is just a better person than he is. The Olympia Nathaniel sees through his spyglass is not the Olympia everyone else sees. The Olympia Nathaniel sees through his spyglass is not even the same Olympia he saw before he purchased the spyglass. Through some means, whether nefarious or benign, Nathaniel's reality concerning Olympia has been altered.

Siegmund's question and the evidence he uses to support his position could lead the reader to believe Nathaniel has lost his mind: he has gone insane. This would be too simple of a diagnosis, however. Nathaniel has not lost his faculties. He is still a fully functioning member of society. He continues his studies and is able to maintain the relationships he enjoyed prior to obtaining the spyglass. However, by calling into question Nathaniel's version of events regarding Coppelius and Coppola, Hoffmann puts the reader in a state of confusion. He declines to provide a clear answer for any questions regarding the events of Nathaniel's life. Ultimately, the reader is left to decide whom to believe and whom not to believe. If Olympia is a real human being, then it seems reasonable to believe Nathaniel's claim that the events of his childhood, when Coppelius tried to take his eyes but was talked into merely dismembering the boy and reassembling him by Nathaniel's father, actually happened, regardless of how fantastical it seems. Allowing for the fantastical and unlikely to occur, suggests, therefore, that Nathaniel's initial belief that the

traveling salesman Coppola is, indeed, his father's friend Coppelius, who terrorized Nathaniel as a child. If, on the other hand, Olympia is not a real human being, then it is just as reasonable to question the events of Nathaniel's childhood. Was Nathaniel actually picked apart by Coppelius that night in his father's study or was the entire incident merely the workings of an overactive imagination of a child already fearful of a mythical being? Was the following fever and illness caused by the events in his father's study or had he become sick through natural means? If Nathaniel had become sick through the course of nature, did the events in his father's study actually happen or was the entire incident a delusion? Is Coppola actually Coppelius in disguise, returned to continue Nathaniel's torment after all these years?

While the majority of *Der Sandmann* can be seen as a critique of the Enlightenment, Hoffmann does provide voices of reason to try to counteract Nathaniel. Klara was introduced as a voice of reason early on with her attempts to reason with Nathaniel by telling him that his imagination is running away from him. She argues that Coppola simply has a similar name to Coppelius. Even though they may resemble each other, it is not logical to think they are the same person. Nathaniel accepts Klara's reasoning and puts both Coppola and Coppelius out of his mind. (Hoffmann 12) Siegmund also acts as a voice of reason, trying to convince Nathaniel that Olympia is actually a robot. Through these two characters, Hoffmann not only creates confusion in the mind of the reader, but he also shows that not all aspects of the Enlightenment should be disregarded. Logic and reason are used to try to convince Nathaniel that he is wrong, that Coppelius and Coppola are not the same person, that Olympia is not a human being. Logic and reason are used to show the reader that what Nathaniel thinks is real might not be true. Nathaniel ultimately dismisses both Klara's and Siegmund's calls to reason out of hand, choosing instead to follow his heart, and what he believes to be real, even though the evidence

against him is quite strong. He rejects logic, representative of the Enlightenment, and gives himself entirely over to his emotions, representative of Romanticism. Not only does Hoffmann exhibit positive effects of the Enlightenment with his use of logic and reason as a counter to Nathaniel, he also shows the danger of completely dismissing logic and reason from one's life. Nathaniel proceeds to fall in love with Olimpia and gets his heart broken when, on his way to propose to Olimpia, he stumbles into the middle of an argument between Spalazani and Coppola, the focus of which is Olimpia. Both claim rights to the robot, and, in a chilling flashback to Nathaniel's childhood incident with Coppelius, they literally tear her apart, removing her eyes and leaving Nathaniel heartbroken. Had Nathaniel accepted Siegmund's logical argument, he may have been able to avoid this unnecessary heartache.

Even Nathaniel's suicide at the end of the story remains somewhat ambiguous. He and Klara, reunited and engaged, are walking through town when they decide to climb a tower. Upon reaching the top, they look out over a vast array of the city and Klara notices a movement below but cannot make out what it is. Nathaniel automatically reaches for Coppola's spyglass to get a better look ("Nathanael faßte mechanisch nach der Seitentasche; er fand Coppolas Perspektiv"). Instead he sees Klara, deathly pale and nearly lifeless. (Hoffmann 32) Seeing her as such and recalling all those he has lost (his father, Olimpia) finally pushes Nathaniel over the edge, emotionally. He tries to rid himself of Klara by throwing her off the balcony. Lothar sees this struggle, rushes up the stairs and saves his sister. Nathaniel continues to run wildly around the balcony. Suddenly he hears Coppelius's voice, notices him in the crowd below, lets out one more cry and jumps to his death. (Hoffmann 33)

This final scene shows that Nathaniel is absolutely content with his life and with Klara, enjoying the day and the view from the tower. It is only when he looks through the spyglass that

everything changes. (Hoffmann 32). Hoffmann's choice of words is particularly interesting here because, as he had done several times earlier in the story, he refers to the instrument not as a spyglass or telescope, but as Coppola's perspective. By referring to the telescope as such, Hoffmann further suggests to his readers that the telescope is distorting Nathaniel's reality. What Nathaniel sees through the telescope is, Hoffmann suggests, the product of what Coppola wants Nathaniel to see, not what actually exists. Despite this, Nathaniel continues to carry Coppola's spyglass. However, despite all the ambiguity created by the spyglass, reaching for it has become an automatic, robot-like reaction ("mechanisch") for Nathaniel whenever he wants to see something far away. He has become so used to using the spyglass that he does not even consider an alternative. His perspective has become Coppola's perspective. He has fully succumbed to the reality that Coppola provided for him via the telescope.

Secondly, Coppelius is, once again, present at a key moment in Nathaniel's life. He was present when Nathaniel's father died; Nathaniel personified the terrifying Sandman as Coppelius; Coppelius worked with Professor Spalazani on his automaton. Now here he is, once again, though, according to the narrator, newly arrived back in town. It is during this final scene in which the text finally brings some certainty to the mental status of Nathaniel. In it, Nathaniel is repeatedly referred to as a madman (Hoffmann 33), indicating that Nathaniel's mind is finally broken. He is no longer able to distinguish between reality and fantasy.

But there remains some room for argument about Nathaniel's sanity. Even though the spyglass has caused him so much trouble and heartache in the matter of Olimpia, he continues to carry it with him and using it is second nature to him. He reaches for it mechanically, without thinking. He has become so reliant on technological advancement and scientific instruments to help him see that he is no longer able to determine what is real without them. Using the spyglass



has become a habit for Nathaniel, an automatic motion, even though use of the spyglass has led to great heartache for Nathaniel. But is the spyglass and, by extension Coppola/Coppelius, the cause of Nathaniel's continued misfortune? Or has something deep inside Nathaniel all this time been at the root of his unfortunate life? Hoffmann declines to elaborate.

*Der Sandmann*, as a text, refuses to offer a definitive rational explanation for the events of Nathaniel's life. Hoffmann's tendency to leave matters unresolved and ambiguous is one of the defining elements of Romantic writing. (Röder 67) Hoffmann excelled at using both narrative elements as well as integrating fantastical elements into his stories. In *Der Sandmann*, he plays with the ideas of an unreliable narrator and how one's reality can be vastly different from everyone else's. He suggests that supernatural forces are possible explanations for the otherwise unexplainable when he neglects to provide a definitive rational answer for events in Nathaniel's life. He introduces voices of reason at various times to create doubt in the reader's mind about what is actually going on, but he never explicitly gives an explanation for what happens.

Many of the elements, narratively and content-related, of *Der Sandmann* continue to play major roles in modern literature and film, almost two hundred years after Hoffmann published his story. The unreliable narrator and the importance of sight, for example, play a prominent role in Christopher Nolan's film *Memento* (2002) in which the main character suffers from an inability to form new memories after a violent encounter. Because he cannot remember anything that happens to him as he searches for his wife's killer, he relies on Polaroids and the notes he takes on them to piece together his reality. Since there is no constant, linear connection between one day and the next, his entire reality is based on his interpretation of his Polaroids and notes, which often changes from day today.

The question of the reliability of one's perspective of reality is a centerpiece of Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club* and the subsequent film from 1999 directed by David Fincher. In this novel, an insomniac, by this very nature already susceptible to questionable accounts of reality, and a soap salesman, Tyler Durden, create an underground fighting culture. Throughout the book and movie, the narrator (the insomniac, notably unnamed) and Tyler Durden are presented as two distinct entities, two distinct people. However, in the end it is revealed that Tyler Durden does not actually exist. He was merely the product of the narrator's sleep-deprived mind. All the things Tyler did during the course of the story were actually done by the narrator, a realization that leads the narrator to attempt suicide. He shoots himself in the head, but the bullet manages to miss the vital organs and he succeeds in ridding himself of his imaginary companion.

Why, after almost two centuries, does E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* continue to inspire artists, both literary and visual? One reason is that the themes of Hoffmann's story are not relegated to one specific time period. The fear of losing one's eyes continues to exist in the modern world. The related fear of losing one's control over and confidence in one's perceived reality is also prevalent in today's society, especially with modern technology as advanced as it is, and continuing to advance at an unprecedented rate. Hoffmann's criticism of the Enlightenment's emphasis on scientific understanding and advancement is still relevant in today's society, reliant as it is on scientific and technological innovation.

Secondly, the narrative device of the unreliable narrator allows authors to insert fantastical elements into their stories while still permitting a solid foundation in an otherwise rational world. This narrative style allows modern authors freedom to explore supernatural events in the lives of their characters while still maintaining a level of logical reality in their

stories. The ambiguity this creates leads one to question what they are seeing or reading, to question the very nature of reality. A common *deus ex machina* is the twist ending in which all previous events are shown to have taken place only in the imagination or dreams of the protagonist.

Thirdly, while the idea of a man in love with a machine may have been laughable and ludicrous at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it seems more and more possible today as technology marches forward. Partially sentient robots already exist and fully sentient robots are possible by the end of the century, if not well before then. (Grossman) The closer science becomes to science fiction, the more logical it appears that something as outlandish as falling in love with a robot could possibly and realistically happen.

When E.T.A. Hoffmann published *Der Sandmann* in 1816, he could not possibly have known the impact it would continue to have two hundred years later. While he may have used writing as an outlet for his ideas and fantastical whims, the themes and ideas put forth in this story are very much real and possible today. His critique of the Enlightenment, particularly its reliance on observation in determining what is real and true, is very much applicable today. From the fear of losing control of one's reality to the idea that one's reality can be altered, either by external (and potentially nefarious) forces or by internal (and equally potentially nefarious) forces to the idea that a science and technology may not always be beneficial to mankind, Hoffmann's novella has proven to be both prescient and timeless.

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